

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

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E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: ELAB, CE, PINT

SUBJ: LAND DISTRIBUTION BECOMES POLITICAL/ISSUE IN PLANTATION
AREAS

1. SUMMARY. A DECISION BY THE GOVERNMENT TO DISTRIBUTE AL-
MOST 7000 ACRES OF NOW-GOVERNMENT-OWNED TEA ESTATE LAND AMONG
APPROXIMATELY THAT NUMBER OF SINHALESE VILLAGE FAMILIES HAS
ROUSED A VIGOROUS PROTEST BY MOSTLY-TAMIL ESTATE WORKERS.
PARTISAN MOTIVES OF GOVERNMENT ARE ASSUMED FROM THE FACT THAT
ALL AFFECTED LANDS ARE IN THE ELECTORATE TO BE CONTESTED BY
P.M.'S SON, ANURA BANDARANAIKE. A THREE-WEEK LONG PROTEST
STRIKE OF TAMIL TEA PLUCKERS IN THE ELECTORATE WAS ENDED BY
GOVERNMENT CONCESSIONS ON MAY 11, THE DAY BEFORE THE STRIKE
WAS TO BE EXTENDED TO COVER ALL OF THE HILL COUNTRY. TAMIL
WORKERS WERE CONCEDED THE RIGHT TO SHARE WITH SINHALESE VILLAGERS
IN LAND DISTRIBUTION WHICH WILL GO AHEAD IN A MODIFIED MANNER.
THE COMPROMISE HAS BEEN MARRED BY POLICE SHOOTING OF A TAMIL
WHO WAS TRYING TO INTERFERE WITH LAND SURVEY; THIS WILL FURTHER
EXACERBATE RACIAL FEELINGS IN THE HILL COUNTRY. END SUMMARY.
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2. GOVERNMENT PLANS TO DISTRIBUTE 7000 ACRES OF PRIME TEA
LAND TO LANDLESS, MOSTLY SINHALESE, VILLAGER HAVE BEEN VIGOROUSLY
OPPOSED BY THE CEYLON WORKERS CONGRESS (CWC), REPRESENTATIVES
OF THE TAMIL PLANTATION LABORERS. LAN WAS TO GIVE APPROXI-
MATELY ONE ACRE PER FAMILY OF NATIONALIZED ESTATE LAND TO
VILLAGERS, WHO COULD SELL PLUCKED GREEN TEA LEAF TO CONTIGUOUS

ESTATES FOR PROCESSING. WITH CURRENT HIGH TEA PRICES THE LUCKY GRANTEES WOULD REAP A HEALTHY PROFIT.

3. ALL OF THE AFFECTED LAND IS IN NUWARA ELIYA/MASKELIYA ELECTORATE WHERE P.M.'S SON ANURA BANDARANAIKE WILL OPPOSE POWERFUL ESTATE LABOR BOSS (AND CWC PRESIDENT) S. THONDAMAN AND UNITED NATIONAL PARTY'S GAMINI DISSANAYAKE IN THE FORTH-COMING ELECTION. ALTHOUGH NUWARA ELIYA IS A LARGE, MULTI-MEMBER ELECTORATE WHICH WILL RETURN THREE M.P.'S, ANURA IS CONCEDED TO BE THE WEAKEST OF THE THREE AND COULD EVEN FALL TO A STRONG FOURTH CANDIDATE. THUS LAND ALIENATION IS OPPOSED BY NON-SLFP'ERS AS BLATANT POLITICAL STUNT TO RAISE HIS POLITICAL STANDING.

4. CWC HAS BEEN CARRYING ON SUCCESSFUL STRIKE IN CONSTITUENCY SINCE APRIL 29 IN PROTEST AGAINST LAND ALIENATION (AND ITS DISCRIMINATORY EFFECT ON TAMIL WORKERS, MANY OF WHOM COULD BE THROWN OUT OF WORK.) THE UNION HAD THREATENED TO EXPAND THE REGIONAL STRIKE TO COVER ALL OF THE TEA COUNTRY ON MAY 12 (IN THE FIRST GENERAL STRIKE OF PLANTATION WORKERS SINCE DECEMBER 1973). IN A LAST MINUTE COMPROMISE ENDING THE STRIKE, THE GOVERNMENT CONCEDED THE RIGHT OF THOSE TAMIL LABORERS WHO ARE CITIZENS TO SHARE IN THE LAND DISTRIBUTION (AGRICULTURE MINISTER HECTOR KOBBEKADUWA, SELF-STYLED SAVIOUR OF THE LANDLESS KANDYAN PEASANT AND ORIGINATOR OF THE LAND ALIENATION PLAN, HAD EARLIER BEEN QUOTED AS SAYING THAT ONLY WHEN THE "LAND HUNGER OF THE SINHALESE ... IS SATISFIED," WILL LAND BE GIVEN TO "IMMIGRANTS," I.E. TAMILS). THE GOVERNMENT ALSO PROMISED TO ALIENATE ONLY SMALL FRAGMENTS OF NUMEROUS ESTATES RATHER THAN WHOLE PLAN-

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TATIONS, WHICH SHOULD ENABLE THEM TO AVOID THROWING LABORERS OUT OF WORK. AN INCREASED DAILY WAGE INDEXED TO WORLD MARKET TEA PRICES WAS ALSO PROMISED. (THE LATTER IS NOT MUCH OF A CONCESSION SINCE THE NEW WAGE SCALE HAD BEEN DRAWN UP BEFORE THE STRIKE.)

5. THE DISPUTE TOOK A VIOLENT TURN MAY 11 WHEN ESTATE WORKERS APPARENTLY ATTEMPTED TO PREVENT GOVERNMENT SURVEYORS FROM DOING PREPARATORY WORK FOR LAND DISTRIBUTION. POLICE WERE CALLED IN AND IN THE ENSUING FRACAS ONE LABORER WAS KILLED AND FOUR OTHERS INJURED BY POLICE FIRING. THIS INCIDENT HAS FURTHER EXACERBATED ALWAYS TENSE SINHALESE-TAMIL RELATIONS IN THE HILL COUNTRY.

REED

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